Conducted by
Felipe Mateus,
Lilian Martins and
Mateus Yuri Passos

"Literary Journalism Gives a Voice to the Silenced"

an interview with John S. Bak

Is it possible to find a single and satisfactory definition of Literary Journalism throughout the world that would suit every writer who dabbles in the genre, convince every editor who publishes it and please every scholar who studies it? This is the question that has preoccuped John S. Bak in his research in the field. One of the founders of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS), Bak believes that every work which considers itself to be Literary Journalism necessarily bears within its very DNA the particular history, culture and society from whence it came. In this interview, conducted via Skype, he talks about the foundation, mission and work of IALJS, the global efforts of Literary Journalism to legitimize itself, and the role the internet and new digital platforms can have in contributing to its success.

(John Bak's resumé)

John S. Bak is Professor of American Studies in the English Department of the University of Lorraine (France). He earned the following degrees: B.A., University of Illinois (USA); M.A. and Ph.D., Ball State University (USA); and a Postdoctoral Habilitation*, Université Paris-Sorbonne (France). His research interests include American drama and theatre, Life-Writing and Memoir, Literary Journalism and Gothic Studies.*

In 2011 you published in the journal *Interférences littéraires* an essay entitled "Toward a definition of International Literary Journalism," based on how different cultures have developed literary journalism over the years. In your conclusions, as well as in your introduction to the book *Literary Journalism around the Globe*, you have stated that it is impossible to formulate an all-encompassing concept of LJ, since each tradition is the embodiment of a specific cultural and journalistic context. However, we would like to ask for *your* definition of Literary Journalism, even if it would be a tentative one.

Let me start by explaining the origins of that article. I was asked by the editors of the journal to republish the introduction to *Literary Journalism around the Globe* but as an independent article. So I basically tried to refashion the scientific argument of Literary Journalism unique from the essays collected in that book. While writing the piece, I think what concerned me the most was that I was coming from an American tradition in Literary Journalism, and the Americans are often considered to be, and perhaps have long considered themselves to be, the leaders and even founders of Literary Journalism. And while there is a certain truth to that, as the essays in the book revealed, what began to emerge from my various discussions with literary journalist scholars around the world is that there was no clear "birth date" and, moreover, no single "understanding" of what constituted Literary Journalism from one country to the next. Having lived outside of the U.S. for more than a decade, I soon recognized that I needed to shed my American biases in the field and opt for a more international model of Literary

Journalism. What I and my friends and colleagues, American or not, began to realize was that the American model was imperialistic in many ways. Yes, the ubiquitous American literary journalists *did* influence many writers around the world, but that what those writers produced was not always derivative or even deferential. There was not *one* Literary Journalism but many Literary Journalisms. And, therefore, most of the definitions that were based largely upon Wolfe's New Journalism were simply not going to work if we were to accept an international model of the form existed. I had hoped that my introduction would show that we can't keep the American definition, and that we have to propose something different, because journalistic traditions and literary traditions throughout the world are simply not American and are not even identical to each other.

For example, the Portuguese traditions in Brazilian Literary Journalism are, and are not, the same as those that came from the colonizing nation. Those in Argentina are, and are not, Spanish. My goal was to try and enlarge the parameters that define Literary Journalism, expanding the American notion to a more flexible, inclusive model, with the understanding that I didn't want to open that definition up to include anything.

And I think that is the risk that we potentially have today in literary journalism studies, as we seek to open that definition up to include more countries and more cultures. In doing so, we obviously run the risk of diluting it to a point that we will not be sure what distinguishes Literary Journalism from journalism or from

literature. In this post-factual world that Donald Trump surely did not create but which he has fully embraced and even nurtured, can legitimate Literary Journalism exist? That is, I think, the essential question that we should be asking ourselves now.

So, if asked to give my definition of international Literary Journalism, I would have to say this: It is journalism, first and foremost, one informed by knowable and verifiable facts and framed within a literary dynamic unique to that country's aesthetics. It is a journalism, however, that is shaped more by inductive than deductive reasoning, obtained not by trusting in other people's singular response to a question, but in searching, often through exhaustive trial and error, for multiple interpretations of a particular fact. Again, this is the idealistic goal of *all* journalism, but I don't want yet to emphasize the literary aspects because literature is different from one country to another. Certain cultures favor literary realism, others magical realism. You have to give each nation the breadth of introducing its own brand of literary quality into the journalistic piece. World literature is obviously *not* like American literature and we should not expect it to be. But French journalism *should be* like American journalism, and vice versa, since it is (idealistically or naively speaking) the goal of all journalism to get as close to the truth of a story as possible.

So, I think that would be my definition. International Literary Journalism has to be journalistic at the core (and I do believe that a single truth exists, even if the facts surrounding it may vary), and the reader, the scientific reader, has to be flexible enough to allow

for the varied sense of what is deemed literary from one country to the next, based upon that country's cultural and historical relationship to the written word. I know this is a big demand, and it's not as simple as it sounds. But we can't keep thinking of international journalism as one simple concept.

Many authors still consider New Journalism in the 1960s U.S. as a peak in the history of Literary Journalism – if not *the* peak – or at least the model from which some international literary journalistic traditions have drawn inspiration. Regarding other traditions you are familiar with, are there any periods or movements of similar relevance?

I think the New Journalists were popular and are today still considered by many to represent the peak in Literary Journalism wasn't just because they were good writers. They were good, don't get me wrong, but a lot of countries had good authors as well. But what made the American movement particularly successful was that, like for the the Beatles, a lot of socio-historical/political stars came into alignment simultaneously. It was a peak, certainly, but I think it was a peak that was also timely. They were the right people for the right time who had the right audiences to read them and the right powers to export them. Are there any similar movements today? The answer to that question lies in the answer to the question as to whether or not there could be another rock group like the Beatles today. I don't think so, at least not in the heavily mediated West. The music industry was ripe for the kind of revolution that hit the Sixties, and the Beatles represented the best, or at least the most eclectic,

band that responded to the needs of a vastly heterogenic audience. The New Journalists did the same, largely in responding not just to one nation's *zeitgeist*, but to those of many nations, both in Europe and in Latin America, that were subjected to censorship or a state-controlled press, and they saw the liberal voice of the New Journalists as a needed antidote to their own localized repression. I think that is what the New Journalism was: at home, it successfully harmonized the voices of a widely cacophonic counter-culturalist America, and abroad it provided a model for certain postwar nations to aspired to and immimate – just as many bands had imitated the Beatles.

There are obviously many good *new* New Journalists writing today out there, both in America and throughout the world. But I don't think we are going to find new movements like the New Journalism, no more than Prague could have produced the New Lost Generation in the Nineties. We are perhaps too self-conscious of movements for one to ever again happen spontaneously. The socio-historical factors are just not there today, thanks in a large part to the internet and social media, which is providing endless space for and instantaneous delivery to the voices of the silenced and oppressed to be heard (and, sadly, almost anyone with an emoji today considers him- or herself to be silenced or marginalized). These deafening cries heard across the internet are unfortunately silencing the truly oppressed with their ubiquity. New movements seemingly come and go nearly every quarter hour, thanks to (or because of) the speed and global spread that social media has achieved. I just

don't think we are going to have these types of iconic movements anymore, at least not in literary journalism.

In July 2006, you have hosted the 1st International Conference on Literary Journalism in Nancy, during which IALJS was born, with you named as founding president. Could you tell us the story of how the association came to be?

The word that I have used in the past to describe the coming together of IALJS was simple: serendipity. It was the right people at the right time – nothing, though, like New Journalism, and even much less than anything like the Beatles. But it was just the right moment for something international to happen. Let me give you an example. The conference initially was not about Literary Journalism at all. It was a conference intended to celebrate the centenary of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. One day in 2005, I sat with some colleagues of mine at a table, and we thought "we need to have a conference, but on what?" So I googled "100th anniversary in 2006" and *The Jungle* came up. So I said "let's have a centenary of *The Jungle*, and that was that. I'm trained in Literature, remember, and not in Journalism, but since I studied the New Journalists in college and was fascinated with them, I saw the potential of looking at *The Jungle* through a literary journalistic lens, even if the book is more a novel than a piece of pure Literary Journalism. Thus the call for papers took that angle.

Let's be honest here, I was a nobody in the field of literary journalism studies in 2006. If you knew my name at all, it was because of the work I had done on Tennessee Williams. But the call for papers magically

reached the right people: David Abrahamson, John Hartsock, Bill Reynolds, Isabel Soares, Alice Trindade, Susan Greenberg, Bill Dow, Isabelle Meuret and Doug Underwood, among others. Maybe they all read the call, but not all of them immediately responded. I did get an email from John Hartsock a few months before the deadline. I'll paraphrase, but it went something like this: "Hi, my name is John Hartsock. Who are heck are you?" (laughs). "I'm involved in literary journalism studies here in the U.S.," he wrote, "and I would like to know what is this conference about." I did not know John before, and I must admit that I had not read his book by this time. We communicated, and he basically said "OK, I'm on board, as long as we redirect the call for papers away from *The Jungle* and towards an international appreciation of literary journalism." I thought it was a fine idea. He had spent time in Russia on a Fulbright and saw that there were avatars of the type of writing the New Journalists and others were doing elsewhere in the world, but he wanted to know if this was something unique to Russia or if in fact there were other pockets of a literary journalism in the world.

There was simply no dialogue back then between nations, no communication that would show one nation to the next that what we were all doing (and in fact had been doing for some time now) was very similar. So I said to myself, "We are going to hold this conference, and we are going to find these people and bring them here." So John (Hartsock) contacted David Abrahamson and Norman Sims (who would eventually join us in Paris the following year for the second annual congress). And the others came out, Alice (Donat Trindade) and Isabel (Soares), for ex-

ample. The core group of people who formed and nourished IALJS were at the initial conference, and it was that which helped the association to survive.

After the conference, we all sat down together and began hammering out the process needed to create the organization. In the months ahead, we discussed bylaws (which David would eventually supply), talked about the academic journal (which John H. pursued), voted on the executive board, discussed about how we would attract members, and created the first website. In all honesty, this first conference in Nancy was a trial run for the real conference which took place the following year in Paris. In one year, we went from 13 speakers to nearly 30 (ok, admittedly, the attraction of Paris over Nancy had a lot do with that). Then we held another one in Lisbon and finally we went to the U.S. We needed to spend a few years first in Europe, to show our international commitment. There was fear that if it went back to the U.S. right away, either the American would take hold of it and turn it into something they had wanted or it would have at least been perceived that way to the rest of the world. Strategically speaking, that was perhaps our best move.

In the decade following the foundation of IALJS, how much have we expanded our horizons on what Literary Journalism is, how it presents itself? What were the most perceptible changes regarding Literary Journalism studies as a discipline? Were there any "blank spots" in the map that were filled in part because of IALJS conferences, journal or book anthologies related to the association?

That is a good question. I think the biggest change that took place was threefold: showing American scholars that, in Literary Journalism, there is a world tradition they didn't invent; building an international canon; and establishing a theoretical heuristic in which to study literary journals separately from journalism or literature.

First, there are LJ traditions in other countries that have existed for almost as long, or longer, than the American or even Anglo-American tradition. That was the answer American scholars like John Hartsock had hoped for when we started IALJS, recognizing precisely that something different was taking place outside of the U.S. It seemed perfectly simple. I mean, who can say what was the first country to invent literature? Impossible to say, really. It was something like that which motivated me more than anything else. Certainly, the American or the Anglo-Saxon tradition has influenced that worldwide versions of which we spoke, but I think that was probably the biggest change that has taken place.

The second biggest thing I think is the influence we have had on the educational programs by building a legitimate canon of LJ and showing that it can stand alone as a discipline. I don't take any credit as a member of IALJS for having influenced these studies. Many universities and institutions – in California (Davis) and perhaps Iowa (Writer's Workshop) and Pennsylvania (Pitt), and in England (Lincoln) – opened not just courses but degrees on non-fiction writing and Literary Journalism, but not because of us, not because of the association. But the fact that they exist justify our as-

sociation, and our association justifies their programs, a symbiotic relationship, is important.

But I think the biggest thing of all, third thing, would simply be the awareness of what people are doing, the dialogue – and from that, the theories – created from the contact with each other and with each others' scholarly traditions. I am here now, speaking to the three of you in Brazil ... that simply would not have happened ten years ago, even though Skype or social media had existed at the time. But we would never have met each other back then. Eventually, perhaps, we would have. Someone would have found a way to link us together. But I *do* think that the association created a place where people can feel at home. We don't always agree, we are going to argue and be in conflict with each other, but we are all in the same house, at least. I mean, isn't that the best definition of a family?

Since 2014, you have been hosting a series of conferences as part of your ReportAGES project, which focuses on Literary Journalistic pieces related to wars – each conference focusing on a specific period or continent. Which aspects of Literary War Journalism have captivated you, or urged you to organize the conferences and the books that have been derived from them? What is singular to Literary Journalism when approaching war as a subject? What makes it different from fiction literature and non-literary war journalism?

I wanted to conduct a larger project on literary journalism, something that would help confirm its place as a specific field of study. We already had IALJS,

along with their annual congress, so I didn't want to compete, to take numbers away from their congress. And the more I had read Literary Journalism from various countries, the more I began to see how it was often, somehow, linked to war. I realized that Literary Journalism gives a voice to the silenced and the oppressed, be it those who have been punished but also those in the army or *junta* or whatever. So I wanted to study this more. But I also realized that, since history was different from one country to another, perhaps the Literary Journalism that was produced would also be different because wars themselves were different.

So I started to host a few seminars, and I acquired a wide range of notions and theories about what actually constitutes war. A colleague from Germany had a definition of war that was basically cyberwar, about how the internet has become a battlefield. There was a whole new range of things that constituted war. So I was confronted with another problem: not only was international Literary Journalism difficult to define, but international war as well. Where was it fought? How large was its scale? Who were the actors involved, and how were we to separate the warring sides? It wasn't like World War I, which was fairly clearly defined. So I figured what I needed to do was to try to divide up the scholarly terrain, and try to, at least, to have a conference where the notions of war were similar.

The goal of the ReportAGES project is to create a database where anyone can upload, as citizen journalists, reportages or literary journalism from countries where a given war gets little to no Western coverage

in the press; this would give us all access to these authors themselves and their cultures and conflicts, which we would not normally have access to. IALJS is a great home, but it is still for the privileged among us who can travel, who have access to a higher education. This database would be more inclusive, more democratic as such. We would be creating a database of Literary Journalism sources from countries all around the world, and that is the ultimate goal of the project.

I'll try to gather examples of Literary War Journalism from around the world, translating parts of them into English, but also keep them in their native language, providing a context in which the text was written, providing any bits information that we can to flesh out that context … pictures, films, video … and eventually upload that to the database, and create an app for Android, an app for Apple, so that we can all use it as a consumer, as a teacher, as a student, as a practitioner…. It will give us different perspectives on wars. If you are studying World War I, for instance, you can choose to use historical documents or literature, but you can also use Literary Journalism as a way to understand the War.

But I would like people not just to consume the site, but also to add things to it. I would like to create eventually an advisory board where someone can submit a literary journalistic piece. For example, if there is a conflict happening right now, say, in Gambia, someone there who wants to – or more, who *is able to* – write about it, as a Literary Journalistic story, they can submit it online and, after the board reviews it and confirms it, the story could be posted. That will only happen, probably, in the next five years of the project.

In Brazil there is a feud regarding the practice of Literary Journalism. Some professionals and scholars state that Literary Journalism often trespasses the boundaries of fiction and fact. How has this topic been approached by Literary Journalism scholars?

That is a good question. I think the biggest hurdle we have today is in finding common ground between creative non-fiction and literary journalism. In short, how certain countries allow for some creative elements and how others do not. The line becomes blurry. Where does literary journalism end and fiction and traditional journalism begin? There is a spectrum of sorts, and not every country agrees on the boundary lines. For instance, in Australia, there is a higher tolerance for allowing fiction to enter Literary Journalism than say, in the U.S. That is why they don't call it "Literary Journalism" in Australia; they have their own terms, their own understanding of the genre.

Well, my familiarity with Brazilian Literary Journalism is limited, although I have spoken to Mônica Martinez[1] a lot I have also talked to other Brazilians, and we are exchanging words. I know the differences between a *crônica* and Literary Journalism in Brazil, about your tradition in that type of news story and about the difficulties some literary journalists in Brazil have because of that common misunderstanding.

In terms of my own view, LJ cannot contain fiction at all, and I tell my students that. If you go into an LJ story, you have entered into a contract with the au-

[1] Professor at the University of Sorocaba's Graduate Program in Communication and Culture and a member of IALJS.

thor about its truth, its factual representation. It's like an old legend I heard as a child, where a young boy comes to a farmer's watermelon patch. He steals one of them, takes it home and eats it. The farmer gets really angry and puts a sign out that reads: "Just so that you know, one of these watermelons has been poisoned." The story ends with the boy taking one of the watermelons anyways, crosses out the word "one" and writes down "two," just to play with the farmer's mind. So now two of the watermelons are "poisoned" (laughs). But if you go into a watermelon patch thinking that one is already poisoned with fiction, and you don't know which element of the story is fact and which is fiction, then the whole story becomes fiction; it takes away from the power of the story, I think.

So when I think about Literary Journalism, I have to believe that it is all factual. That is why I struggle with Truman Capote at times. Yes, he produced a great and engaging read, but I don't feel so moved at the end because I don't know how much of that is Truman Capote and how much is actual fact. I like the *New Yorker* for its fact-checking tradition that goes over every detail of a story to verify it before publication; so when you read their stories, you can be sure, from beginning to end, that is non-fiction.

Also in Brazil there are scholars who criticize the use of "Literary Journalism" as a quality seal for stories, magazines, books and authors, even if occasionally some of those would not have the narrative structures expected from Literary Journalism works. Some scholars even use the word "opportunistic" to describe such practice. Did any topic similar to this arise in the con-

ferences and seminars you have participated in? Have there been cases of misuse or even overindulgence in the labeling of a work as Literary Journalism by writers or publishers?

There is a sentence by T.S. Eliot that goes "bad writers borrow, good writers steal" (laughs). The fact that someone might be using the label "Literary Journalism" to give their book visibility, for me, is a positive sign, because Literary Journalism was seemingly never so popular as it is now, so no, we never discussed that. The fact that some Brazilian writers see it not just as a legitimate genre, but also as a brand, is a good sign, I think. The fact people are doing it opportunistically is not good (and there are certainly cases, even in the U.S., where a writer claims the piece to be 100% perfect factual, and it turns out later to be a hoax – I'm thinking of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, for example – but using LJ as a label to insure its quality seems to me a positive sign. The fact that journalists know it, and scholars like you are reporting on it, gives Literary Journalism an importance it didn't have ten years ago, internationally speaking. That is a victory; if someone is trying to sell something that is not Literary Journalism, let the readers call it out; because if we try to oppose it, saying "you are not one of ours; you don't belong to this group," then we are just repeating what many others have done to Literary Journalists during last century.

The practice of long-form journalism is now spread across the internet. Longform.org, Atavist and even Buzzfeed are some of the websites that have been publishing long-form reporting. Would you con-

sider their stories as some branch of Literary Journalism? Could the expansion of long-form journalism be related to the current Literary Journalism scene?

Definitely. I know that long-form is getting a lot of positive play among Literary Journalism practitioners and scholars alike. They are good for the American tradition because, I think, American Literary Journalism's approach allows for both hard-core stories, but also lighter-end ones, which is something you see less frequently in European literary journalism, which is more often about serious social or political issues; My main concern with internet and long-form journalism, though, is this: just because it's long doesn't make it good. There are editors who basically tell writers, "Right, you wrote ten thousand words, and I want seven." Honestly, editing a story down tighter can make it better.

The problem with online publications, it seems to me, even in the academic field, is that because the internet is a more open and democratic, it has enough space to allow for good and average or even bad writing. The gate-keeping editor or publisher has at times been eliminated and that can damage the reputation of the good work, even in scholarship. But, yes, online publishing is necessary today because publishers are not handing out the big contracts to write in book length Literary Journalism as they had done in the past. These platforms are giving people a chance to write their long-form stories and reach an audience, but I still think there needs to be a gate-keeper, and I think it is our job, as scholars, to keep tabs on long-form writing in Buzzfeed and other spaces, insuring

their quality, just as we world do for the *New Yorke*r or *Esquire*. Or, in your case, in Brazil, to check if these stories have the same quality as the stories that were published in *Realidade*. I know that that LJ source doesn't exists anymore, but you would want the same quality of writing today in Brazilian online sources that it had in the 1960s.

It's up to readers and scholars, then, to keep the writers and the websites in line. It's our job; we are not policeman looking to censor, but we are gate-keepers who need to insure continued quality.

The development of long-form journalism has been in some ways related to the development of new software resources and publishing platforms – even self-publishing platforms such as Medium. In your opinion, how can, or could, internet and digital resources contribute to the practice of literary journalism?

We need to combine a couple of events that happened earlier. What internet and digital does is to distribute the stories in a different way. The concept of the front page, or scoop, is gone for the most part. I look at CNN at 10 o'clock in the morning, and by 3 pm, the top stories have already changed. So Literary Journalism has to embrace the possibilities of the web, the "angels" of long-form journalism. But when you accept the angels, you have to accept the "demons" that come with them.

The internet is difficult to control. There are trolls out there bent on damning nearly anything that appears online in a written form. You have to control

these demons. That is why what I want to do for the ReportAGES online database is to create a system where you upload your story, but it doesn't go immediately online, where there is still a form of control. Not censorship, but ethical control. Those are things that online databases are going to have to start dealing with, particularly those Literary Journalism pieces related to wars. You don't want to use it as a way of retribution, as a way to promote one political ideology over another -- a "revenge" form of literary journalism, for which the current political atmosphere in the U.S. is surely possible.

So, for me, there are really important ethical and editorial concerns about putting stories online. There is a huge responsibility for editors to control these stories. So the digital world is very important for the future of Literary Journalism, but I think we need to, like any science, consider less *how* something can be done and more about *if* that something should be done. And that includes not just the publishing of the story online, but also perhaps the writing of that story in the first place. Those are the questions online editors need to ask and enforce. Getting things online is great, but what are the potential consequences of that story? That is the question that needs to addressed first, I think.